

# Wild Times

A Free Publication of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department

Spring 2005

## THE HABITAT CONNECTION: FABULOUS FOWL

Did you know that almost half of Wyoming's birds spend part of each year south of the border? In a few weeks spring will arrive bringing birds we haven't seen since last summer. Soon flocks of birds will descend upon us like the colorful tanagers, bluebirds, goldfinches and many other species. These birds are called migratory birds. Migratory birds leave Wyoming in autumn to escape the harsh winter months to go to a warmer area. This may be as close as Colorado or as far as South America on the equator. On a globe can you find the equator? Imagine you were a bird flying from Wyoming to the equator or even Argentina! These birds return to Wyoming to nest in our state to raise a their young, called a brood. To do this they will need good habitat: places to nest and hide; places with seeds, worms and bugs to eat. Since a migrating bird might spend the winter in Mexico and the summer in Wyoming, it needs good habitat in both places. And different kinds of birds need different habitats. They might like the pine forest of the Bighorn Mountains or a field of sagebrush, like the meadowlark, Wyoming's state bird. Watch closely in the cottonwood trees along the North Platte River, you might see an oriole. But don't forget some birds stay in Wyoming all year round! What birds do you see in the winter?



The pine grosbeak uses its heavy beak to crush seeds.



An oriole.



A meadowlark's nest.



A western tanager.



# FIELD Wildlife Journal

A specialist is someone who has in depth, or a lot of, knowledge about one particular subject. A specialist spends many years studying their special interest, and uses their knowledge to work on a specific problem.

We all know specialists. Dentists are doctors who specialize in teeth. Optometrists are doctors who specialize eye care, and pediatricians are doctors who specialize in children's medicine.

Some biologists are specialists. One of these biologists works with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to manage sage-grouse populations in the state. Tom Christiansen is located in the Green River Regional Office. He is working with lots of different people across the state to write a plan to help conserve sage-grouse. He spends a lot of time on the road, and talking to the citizens of Wyoming about sage-grouse and knows that his work will help.

Christiansen sometimes gets to count sage-grouse when they gather for their spring mating dances. The places they gather to dance are called leks, or strutting grounds. Counting these birds on their leks helps the department keep track of sage-grouse populations. Knowing how many birds are using leks from year to year helps us decide the best ways to manage populations to make sure sage-grouse continue to live in Wyoming.



Flickers are large woodpeckers.

LuRay Parker



A yellow-headed blackbird perches on a reed.

Ron Mayer



LuRay Parker

A merganser with its brood.



Sage-grouse.



# WILDLIFE PROFILES

Wyoming has a rich variety of bird life. We have long-legged birds that wade and short-legged birds that paddle. We have tiny birds that feed on insects or sweet flower nectar, and large, predatory birds powerful enough to kill small

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# WILDLIFE PROFILES

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mammals. Some of our birds are brightly colored; others are gray, black and brown to blend in with their backgrounds. The flashcards on this page will better acquaint you with four examples of Wyoming's fabulous fowl.

## GREAT HORNED OWL

Whooh! Whooh-whooh-whooh! Whooh! Everybody knows the haunting call of the great horned owl. This predator hunts at night, flying silently and nabbing skunks, rabbits and other animals in the death grip of its powerful claws. Relying on superb night vision and excellent hearing, the great horned owl kills more than 200 different kinds of prey, including other owls. Its horns aren't really horns but tufts of feathers. It nests in abandoned buildings, in caves and tree holes, and in nests built by other birds. The great horned owl's feathers make it look much bigger than it really is.

## WOOD DUCK

The male, or drake, wood duck is our most colorful duck. Its clownish plumage makes it easy to identify. The drake has a cap-like tuft of feathers on its head called a crest. As is often the case with ducks and other birds, the female wood duck is drab brown. The wood duck is small and is not seen as often as some of our other kinds of ducks. It eats plants and seeds along with a few insects and other small water animals. The wood duck will nest in tree holes or in man-made nest boxes.

## PELICAN

The pelican is best known for its bill which has a pouch underneath. The pelican scoops up water and fish at the same time. Then it squeezes out the water—sometimes a gallon or more—and swallows the fish. In spring, a big orange growth appears on top of the male's bill. Pelicans are short-legged, heavy-bodied and clumsy-looking on land. In the air, however, they are smooth, expert flyers that travel in perfect formation. If you stretch out a pelican's wings, they measure almost ten feet from tip to tip.

## GREAT BLUE HERON

Look for this big, long-legged bird in marshy places. The great blue heron wades in shallow water, hunting for fish, frogs, snakes and other small animals. It is quick with its long, pointed beak. When airborne, it bends its long neck into an "s"-shape and flies slowly, fanning the air with its big wings. Herons nest in colonies, groups of nests built high in trees. Seven of every ten great blue herons die during their first year of life.



# OUR Wildlife Heritage

## FEATHERS IN THE PAST

Until the 1880s, several different tribes of Plains Indians lived and hunted in what is now Wyoming. They made clothes, teepees, tools and other things they needed from animals, plants and stone. Native Americans paid special attention to birds. Birds were not as important for food as for their bones and feathers. Some tribes

had special rever-

ence for the crow,

a large black bird common in Wyoming.

Most tribes also revered the eagle, our largest and most majestic bird of prey. Native Americans used eagle wing feathers to make war bonnets and other headdresses. Feathers were important for Native American ceremonies and ceremonial attire, or dress. Native American dancers waved feather fans and decorated themselves with bustles, circular arrangements of colorful feathers.

Some of the dances mimicked the mating dance of the sharp-tailed grouse.



Lulu Roy Parker

A sharp-tailed grouse dances.



Native Americans used feathers in their ceremonial dress and ceremonies.



WCPD

A girl dances with a feather fan.



Lulu Roy Parker

Golden eagles were sacred to many Native American tribes.



# Around Wyoming



Male sage-grouse in their mating feathers.

WGFD



LuRey Parker

This swan can be identified by its neckband.

## SAGE-GROUSE

Sage-grouse numbers in Wyoming have declined, or gone down. Biologists and citizens are worried about these declines. Some citizens are so worried that they asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list them as Threatened and Endangered Species so that they could get special help to increase the number of sage-grouse.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department manages sage-grouse populations in Wyoming, and they are worried too. They asked Wyoming citizens to help. They asked people with different jobs and interests to be members of what they called "local working groups". There are eight groups in Wyoming. These groups are looking at areas around their communities because threats to sage-grouse are different in different places in the state. The groups have a long list of things that could affect the number of birds, and they are trying to narrow the list down, and come up with things they can do to help the birds.

Some of the groups have already started working on projects. The Northeast Sage-Grouse Working Group put bird ladders in stock tanks to help keep birds from drowning if they fall into a tank of water. The Shirley Basin/Bates Hole Working Group is working to make the habitat they live in better, and all of the groups are trying to make people

more aware of how they can help conserve sage-grouse.

Watch your local newspaper to see what the working groups are doing in your area! Even though the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service decided not to list the sage-grouse as Threatened and Endangered right now, conservation efforts are still important.

You can help! You can keep track of your dogs and cats so that they don't disturb birds on nests or leks. You can conserve natural resources by turning off your light in your room, not using more water than you need and recycling. And you can learn more about sage-grouse so that you can make wise decisions. What are some things you think might help the sage-grouse?

## DAPPER SWANS

Trumpeter swans look pretty much alike, but some are now sporting colored collars and leg bands. The colors help biologists to learn the birds' ages and to track them on their migration flights. Not long ago, trumpeters were on the verge of extinction. Only 300 of them remain in our area today. Habitat loss and dry weather have slowed the swans' recovery. Many swans are also killed when they fly into power lines.

Swans feed on plants that grow in shallow water. One of the best places to view these big graceful birds is on the National Elk Refuge near Jackson, especially in autumn.



# Outdoor Classroom

## ATTRACTING BIRDS

You can attract birds to your backyard or school by improving the habitat for them. One way to do this is by planting trees and shrubs for them to perch in. Birds also love water and will come to a birdbath to drink and bathe. Many birds will visit bird feeders; some will nest in nest boxes. For more information on attracting and feeding birds, see the Audubon Society's web site: [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)

## WHAT KIND ARE THEY?

Birds will soon invade Wyoming as they begin migrating north to their nesting grounds. How many different kinds of birds can your school class identify this spring? Your class can check out bird identification books from your library and also from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. Call Janet at 777-4670. Make a list of the birds you identify and let us know at Wild Times.



LuRoy Parker

Rosy finches  
at a feeder.



LuRoy Parker

The eared grebe  
dives deep and  
swims underwater.



LuRoy Parker

Woodpeckers  
nest in tree  
cavities.



LuRoy Parker

A Clark's nutcracker  
enjoys a fatty  
mixture called suet.



# ► TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE ◀

## HEADWIND

Suppose a flock of geese are flying north over Wyoming at 50 miles per hour. Suddenly a strong wind of 30 miles per hour comes up and the geese must fly straight into it. How does this wind change their speed?



(Answer: It slows them to 20 miles per hour.  $50 - 30 = 20$ )

## BIRD TALK

Birds inspire lots of famous, wise sayings. What do you think these sayings mean about people?

- *Birds of a feather flock together.*
- *The early bird gets the worm.*
- *Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.*



The evening grosbeak.



LuRay Parker

# ► LEARNING LINKS ◀

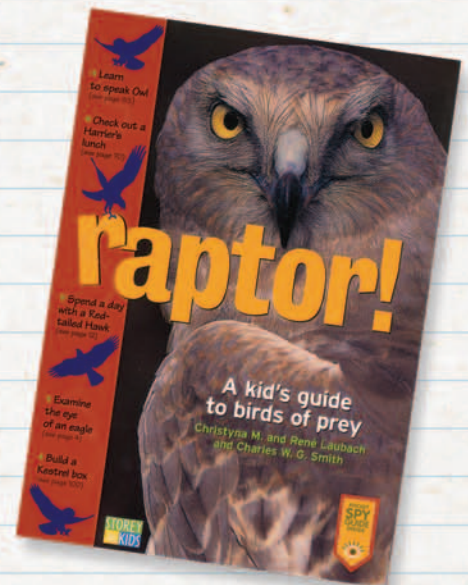
Do you know why shade-grown coffee is important for migratory birds? Do some research on the Internet and see what you can learn. Maybe you can even teach your parents about the importance of drinking shade-grown coffee.

### WEB SITES:

Ducks Unlimited is a club that helps protect habitat for waterfowl. Explore the fun things to do and learn at their Greenwing Web Site: [www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org) You can also visit the Audubon website which is an organization famous for conservation and bird watching: [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)

### BOOKS:

Learn all about hawks, eagles, owls and falcons in *Raptor!: A Kids Guide to Birds of Prey* by Christyna and Rene Laubach (Storey Publishing, 2002)



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